



# VALUES AND VISION FOR AN AFFORDABLE SEATTLE

## MESSAGING NOTES & CONSIDERATIONS FROM SIGHTLINE INSTITUTE FOCUS GROUPS WITH SEATTLE RESIDENTS

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Sightline Institute commissioned an opinion research and strategy firm, FM3 Research, to conduct focus groups to understand attitudes about affordability, growth, density, development, and displacement in Seattle. FM3 conducted two groups, one with homeowners and one with low- to moderate-income renters. Participants in each group were screened to be politically moderate or progressive Seattle residents of at least five years, fairly neutral about housing issues and density, and not overly distrustful of government. Both recruited groups reflect a diverse range of ages, education levels, and racial and ethnic backgrounds. We explored their experiences of a growing city as well as shared values, a vision for the city, and responses to a range of solutions.

## ATTITUDES AND EXPERIENCES:

### Axiety over change, displacement, and newcomers

We asked each group to share how they feel about growth, density, development, displacement, and a menu of affordability solutions. Needless to say, housing is an emotional, top-of-mind issue. Participants expressed their sense that growth and development feels out of control, and that solutions cater to newcomers, not “locals.” They see developers as the problem, not part of the solution. In this context, it’s difficult to cast building as key to keeping prices down.

- Housing in Seattle is characterized as **a crisis** and **out of control**.
- While people see growth as a sign that the city is thriving, most voiced feeling **more drawbacks than benefits** from it: traffic, economic insecurity, loss of “character,” loss of trees and open space, and loss of parking.
- Participants have **mixed feelings** about Seattle’s success. They described a thriving city as a place where economic opportunity and diversity are expanding, people can find a living-wage job, businesses are “booming,” and you see people out and about and, surprisingly, economic activity like “cranes on the skyline.”
- Renters and homeowners alike are **anxious about growth and change** in Seattle. Homeowners may feel safer or “lucky,” but homeowners don’t feel added economic security commensurate to soaring home prices. Nearly all participants recounted friends’ or their own struggles to afford in-city housing.
- Many expressed concerns about **gentrification and displacement**.
- People feel that policies to accommodate growth cater only to newcomers and profit developers, **leaving existing residents out of the story**.
- Us vs. Them: Participants **blamed an influx of newcomers** for the downsides of growth and change. They characterized these newcomers as different, often high-paid tech workers drawn to the city for jobs rather than love of Seattle or community “fit.”
- **What shortage?** Participants do not blame soaring prices on undersupply or shortage. In fact, most assume an oversupply, a belief that a large share of new buildings are sitting empty. However, they made a number of anecdotal references to competition, namely waiting lists and bidding wars.

## SHARED VALUES AND CONNECTIONS:

### Aspiring to the city's ideals

We also found opportunities for productive engagement on solutions. Seattleites don't always agree how we get there, but our qualitative research helped us hone in on a destination they do agree on. Participants consistently demonstrated Seattle's big-heartedness and commitment to equity and diversity. Messages that emphasize these shared values and big-picture goals for the city can establish a positive mindset when it comes to policy solutions

- Participants value Seattle's **natural beauty**, open spaces, and proximity to outdoor recreation.
- Seattle residents value the city's **cultural richness**: people from all walks of life and widely available art, music, food, coffee, and sports.
- Participants consistently demonstrated Seattle's **big-heartedness and commitment to diversity and equity**. They signaled that Seattleites want to take care of each other, and especially take care of the most vulnerable and marginalized members of the community.
- Participants **identified those most hurt by Seattle's housing situation** as young people and children, seniors, low-income families, and homeless people.
- More specifically, participants showed **concern and empathy for groups historically excluded** from homeownership and currently experiencing disproportionate disadvantage from high housing costs: immigrants, people of color, African-Americans, Native Americans, and refugees.
- Participants volunteered **particular categories of workers** who can't afford to live in Seattle: artists, firefighters, veterans, health workers, teachers, and, more generally, "non-tech workers."
- Throughout the conversations in both groups, participants expressed concerns about **wealth imbalance, loss of diversity**, and whether Seattle is really committed to being a city where people from all income levels can afford to live.
- People find it appealing to **leverage growth to fund affordable housing**.
- They want solutions that **help people deal with the drawbacks** of growth and change.

- Seattleites value the city's distinct neighborhoods. Many participants also appreciate that Seattle is "a little big city," not an impersonal metropolis sanitized of character.

## POLICY PERCEPTIONS:

### Top of mind: Subsidies, not supply solutions

- Most participants are drawn to policies that they think would reduce the high cost of housing and put it in reach of people who need it. They favor easier-to-understand and seemingly more direct solutions like **rent control and developer fees, not building new homes**.
- Restrictive **zoning and building rules are not top of mind** as culprits, **nor are oversized single-family zoning** or resistance to change in single-family neighborhoods
- Participants are **distrusting of developers** as part of the solution.
- For renters and homeowners alike, **parking concerns** are at the root of their objection to more local density.
- Seattle's plan to build 50,000 new market-rate and 20,000 subsidized homes over the next decade was viewed as **a giveaway to developers**. Most thought that the share of subsidized homes should be far higher.
- Participants **did not believe certain well-intentioned policies could backfire**, like rent control and fees on developers, by making even fewer homes available for rent or purchase.
- Participants in both groups **rejected real estate economics** showing that developments don't pencil out if too many units are below market-rate.
- The **prevailing thinking is that landlords and developers have a choice**, that they would still make a profit if they charged less.
- Many expressed **a desire to stem growth**, or at the very least not incentivize it. The city's affordability measures are often seen as simply encouraging more growth.

## MESSAGE TESTING AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

### Think big-hearted, big-picture

The most effective messages help toggle people to their big-hearted values, to common goals for the city to be inclusive and racially and economically diverse as it grows, and to big-picture “we” thinking rather than narrower “me” thinking.

- Participants favored messages that expressed **a shared vision for the kind of city and communities we want to live in**, including expanding opportunity and affordability for all kinds of people at all income levels. For example, respondents want to see communities that are open, affordable, and diverse, where hard-working families can afford to live and enjoy access to transit, jobs, schools, and parks.
- To **regain a sense of control and address equity concerns, consider a “choice” frame** that suggests two ways the city can go: one where we expand opportunity for all kinds of people at all income levels, another where we see prices rising and all but the wealthiest residents pushed out of the community.
- When moderators addressed specific, top-level concerns about aesthetics, parking, and open spaces, participants were more willing to think about new construction.
- **The word density itself was a negative** for participants. But most **responded positively to a description of a dense neighborhood** framed in terms of convenience, access, and quality of life: “When people can bike or bus to work and can walk to the grocery store, schools, and parks, we reduce traffic, improve health, and benefit small, local businesses and restaurants.”
- Participants were **receptive to specific types of “dense” housing**: triplexes, duplexes, small apartment buildings, and backyard cottages. They anticipated that these would be more affordable and aesthetically fitting Seattle’s existing neighborhoods, as well as beneficial to homeowners.
- **Avoid “overselling” benefits.** People are skeptical of messages that sound too good to be true or too much like a sales pitch.
- Messages should **highlight people’s inclination to protect vulnerable groups of people**, especially seniors, young people, people of color, and low-income workers. It’s good to give examples of compelling people and

familiar places. Participants responded to **specific communities**—e.g., South Park or the Central District—and **job types**—e.g., health care workers, teachers, and baristas.

- There's work to do **reinforcing connections between shortage and price**.
- There's work to do **reinforcing connections between pollution and climate change** as well as **homelessness with housing affordability**. Green values are strong, and there is great concern for Seattle's homeless, but the link to housing policies is not immediately evident. Consider familiar ways to reinforce that a key part of the problem is due to a shortage of housing, especially echoing existing narratives about bidding wars and long lines of applicants for apartments.

Qualitative research cannot be generalized but helps us map noteworthy obstacles and opportunities for productive messages about solutions. As in most complex policy contexts, we find that people can hold multiple, often conflicting beliefs and attitudes. Thinking about housing affordability and growth in Seattle, participants toggle between competing perspectives and motivations. The most effective messages will help trigger and reinforce big-hearted, community-minded attitudes.

**FM3 Research** is a California-based company that has been conducting public policy-oriented opinion research since 1981, including hundreds of surveys and focus groups in the Seattle area, Puget Sound region, and Washington State, and intensive research on housing affordability in San Francisco, Oakland, Denver, and Multnomah County, Oregon.

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